

The Beginning of Things

A Greek myth
Retold by W.H.D. ROUSE

In the beginning there was Chaos, a great hollow Void, in which the seeds or beginnings of all things were mixed up together in a shapeless mass, all moving about in all directions. By degrees these beginnings slowly sorted themselves out; the heavier parts gathered together and became Earth; the lighter parts flew up and became the sky, with air between; and under the earth was a dark place called Tartarus. In the heavens, the sun, moon, and stars appeared one by one; on earth, the land separated from the sea; rain fell, and the rivers ran down from the hills; trees grew up, and the world became something like what we know, and it had the shape of a great round ball, or a disk, like a large plate.

From Chaos, the great Void, came forth many and strange children; but first and most wonderful of all was Eros, or Love, who came no one knows how, and was quite different from all the others; he outlived them all, and still lives, the most mighty of all divine powers. From Chaos came forth also Erebus and Black Night; and their child was the Day.

From Chaos, lastly, came into being Father Uranus, or Heaven; and Pontus, the Sea; and Mother Earth. Heaven and Earth were parents of a great brood of children. These were called, in general, the Titans. The brood began with monsters, but they improved as they went on. Among the monsters were three, with fifty heads apiece and a hundred hands; their names were Cottus, Gyges, and Briareus. Three

others were named the Cyclopes; Cyclops means "goggle-eyed," and each Cyclops had one huge eye in the middle of his forehead, with one huge and bushy eyebrow above it. There were others, some of whom we shall meet later; and then came a superior brood of children. I will not tell you the names of all these now, but one was Oceanus, the ocean stream, which runs like a great river all round the earth; and one was Hyperion, who took charge of the light by night and day. He was the father of Eos, the Dawn, and Helios, the Sun, and Selene, the Moon. And the youngest of the children of Heaven and Earth was named Cronus: the youngest but the most terrible of them all.

Now Uranus hated his children and feared them; and as they were born, he hid them in secret places of the earth and kept them prisoners in darkness. But Mother Earth was angry to see her children so badly treated; so she persuaded them to rebel, and they did so, and cast down Uranus from the sky. They cast him down into Tartarus, the dark region below the earth. In the fight he was wounded by Cronus; drops of his blood fell on the sea, and from these drops sprang up Aphrodite, who became the goddess of beauty and love. Her name means "daughter of the foam," because she came up out of the foam of the sea. Other drops of his blood fell on the earth; and from these sprang up the Giants and the Furies. We shall hear of these later, for the Giants made war on the gods long afterward; and the Furies used to range about the world, when men were created, chasing and punishing those men who shed blood.

Cronus was leader of this rebellion, and he became King of Heaven in his father's place. When he became king, he cast down his brothers and sisters into Tartarus, except one, Rhea, whom he married. But he was not so careful about their children. Some of them were useful, like Dawn, and Sun, and Moon, so he left them alone. Another of the Titans had five sons. Atlas was one of those sons, and he was made to stand by the gate of Tartarus and to hold up the sky on his shoulders. Two others of this family were very famous afterward. Their names were Prometheus and Epimetheus, that is to say, Forethought and Afterthought. Prometheus was the cleverest of all the Titans, and he went to live on the earth. There he used to wander about making models out of mud to amuse himself.

Now at that time things were not quite sorted out from Chaos, and there were bits of life still in the mud or clay of the earth. So when Prometheus made this clay into all sorts of odd shapes, the shapes came alive as he made them, and became worms, and snakes, and

crocodiles, and all kinds of strange creatures, which you can see in museums. As he grew more skillful, he made also birds and animals, and at last he thought he could make something in the shape of the immortals. His first attempt went on four legs, like the other animals, and had a tail like them; it was a monkey in fact. He tried all sorts of monkeys, big and small, until he found out how to make his model stand upright. Then he cut off the tail and lengthened the thumbs of the hands and twisted them inward. That may seem a very little thing, but it makes all the difference between a monkey's hands and a man's; just try and see how many things you cannot do if you tie your thumb fast to your first finger. And if you look at the skeleton of a man in the museum, you will see that you have a tiny tail in the right place, or at least the bones of it, all that is left after Prometheus cut it off.

Thousands of years afterward, the Greeks used to show in one of their temples lumps of clay, which they said were left over after Prometheus had made the first man. This clay was the color of mud and smelled a little like human flesh.

Prometheus was very much pleased with his new pet. He used to watch men hunting for food and living in caves and holes, like ants or badgers. He determined to educate men as well as he could, and he was always their friend. Cronus did not take notice of what he was doing; and now we must turn to Cronus and see what he was doing himself.

Cronus had married one of the Titans, named Rhea; and he was determined that his children should not rebel against him, as he had rebelled against his father, so as soon as one was born, he swallowed it whole. Five he swallowed up in this way; but then Rhea grew tired of this, as she wanted babies to play with, so when the sixth was born, she determined to save him. She took a big stone of the same size as a baby and wrapped it in swaddling clothes and presented it to Cronus as the last baby. Cronus promptly swallowed the stone, and was quite contented. This was really a thing easy to manage, because no doubt the gods used to do with their babies just as the Greek mothers used to do: they wrapped them round and round with a long narrow cloth, until they looked like a chrysalis, or a long plum, with the baby's head sticking out of the end. Then Rhea took the real baby, whose name was Zeus, and hid him in the island of Crete, in a cave which you can still see at this day. He was put in the charge of two

nymphs, who fed him on goat's milk, and the cave was watched by armed guards; whenever the baby cried, the guards made such a din by clashing their spears on their shields that Cronus heard nothing of its cries.

Rhea bided her time; and when Zeus grew up, she told him how Cronus had swallowed his brothers and sisters, and how she had saved Zeus himself; and they made a plot against Cronus, as Cronus had done against his father. Together they managed to give Cronus a strong dose of medicine. This made Cronus very sick, and he disgorged all the children, one after another. First came the stone which Rhea had made him swallow; and Cronus was very much surprised to see that. You may see the stone, if you wish, for it was placed in the sacred place of Delphi, and it is still there, in the museum. Then came the five others in order. I must tell you their names now, because they all come into the story; they were Hestia, Demeter, Hera, Hades, and Poseidon. Strange to say, they had all grown up quite well inside their father, and now they were as big as Zeus, and ready to join in the plot. Then they all made war upon Cronus, and the war went on for ten years, but neither party could win.

Cronus got friends to help him, as far as he could, and one of them was the wise Prometheus. As the war went on, Prometheus said, "Sir, I advise you to bring up your brothers from Tartarus." But Cronus was afraid of his brothers; he said, "No, thank you, no brothers for me." When Prometheus found that Cronus was too stupid to take good advice, he went over to the side of Zeus. To Zeus he gave the same advice; and although Zeus was not very wise, he was wise enough to take this advice. So he set free the three Cyclopes named Thunderer, Lightener, and Shiner; and they were so grateful that they gave Zeus a gift each—the thunder and the lightning and the thunderbolt. They also gave Hades a cap which made him invisible when he put it on; and they gave Poseidon a trident, or three-pronged spear. Next Zeus set free the three monsters with fifty heads and a hundred hands. You see what an advantage that gave to Zeus. Each of them was like a quick-firing gun, and could throw a hundred stones for Cronus's one.

Now Zeus made a feast for his friends. He gave them nectar, the drink of the gods, and ambrosia, the food of the gods, which was the food of immortality; and he said, "Now let us fight, and make an end of this long war."

Then there was a terrible battle. The three monsters caught up

rock in each of their three hundred hands, and cast them in volleys at Cronus. Zeus thundered and lightened and launched his thunderbolts. The earth shook, the sea boiled, the forests caught fire and burned, blustering winds made confusion all round. In the end, they conquered Cronus and bound him in chains and shut him up in dark Tartarus.

As far as heaven is high above the earth, so deep is Tartarus below the earth. Nine days and nine nights a stone would fall from heaven to earth; nine days and nine nights it would fall from earth to deep Tartarus. A brazen wall runs round it, and brazen gates close it in; there Cronus was in prison, guarded by the Cyclopes and the three hundred-handed monsters. In front of the gate stands Atlas, immovable, bearing the heavens upon his shoulders. A fearful watchdog guards the gates, Cerberus, with three heads and three gaping mouths. When anyone goes in, Cerberus fawns upon him and licks his hands with his three tongues; but if anyone tries to go out, Cerberus devours him up. There Night and Day meet together and greet one another, as one passes in and the other passes out. Within dwell Sleep and Death, brothers, the children of Night. Sleep can wander over the earth at will, seizing men and letting them go; but Death, once he gets hold of a man, never lets him go again, for there is no pity in his heart.

And there dwells Styx, the lady of the black river of Hate, eldest daughter of Oceanus. When quarrels arise among the immortal gods, then Zeus sends his messenger Iris with a golden jug to bring some of the waters of Styx, which falls from a high and beetling rock. The gods must swear an oath by this water. If any of them breaks the oath, for one year he lies breathless, and cannot partake of sweet nectar and ambrosia; after that year he is cut off from the meeting of the gods for nine years more, and then only may he come back and join their company.

In that dark place the banished Titans dwell, guarded by the monsters. And the Cyclopes are always busy, forging the thunderbolts of Zeus.

After the victory, Zeus and his two brothers were ready to fight each other to decide which should be king; but the wise Prometheus persuaded them to cast lots and to share the sovereignty among them. So lots were cast. Zeus became King of Heaven, and Poseidon King of the Sea, and Hades King of dark Tartarus; but the earth belonged to them all.

By telling stories of how the gods created people, how did people create the gods?

There are often two contrasting worlds in the myths. What is associated with "above" or "up" in this myth? What is associated with "below" or "down"?

Why do you think people believed that the first and most wonderful of creatures was Love? Why did they imagine that Love was "quite different" from the other children of Chaos?

her death that he could do nothing but weep. From his tears sprang up more gods and goddesses. Then he fell into a terrible rage, picked up his sword, and cut off the fire god's head. More gods and goddesses were created from the fire god's blood as it dripped from the sword to the ground.

For a very long time, Izanagi was *inconsolable*.¹ Without Izanami life hardly seemed worth living. So he decided to visit Yomi, the Land of the Dead, and try to bring his wife back to life. Izanami met him at the gateway to Yomi, hidden by the shadows and shades of half-light. Izanagi begged her to come back with him to their island. She told him that she would go and ask the god of death for his advice, but she warned Izanagi not to try and look at her as she disappeared into the darkness. Izanagi meant to obey her, but she was gone for such a long time that he grew impatient. He broke off a tooth from the comb he wore in his hair and lit it to make a torch. Then he followed Izanami inside. And there in the glowing torchlight, a *hideous*² sight awaited him—Izanami's dead body, rotting and full of worms.

Izanagi ran away as quickly as he could. When he reached the sea, he plunged into the water to wash away the terrible memory of what he had seen. And as he washed, he produced hundreds of gods. From his left eye came Amaterasu, the goddess of the Sun and ruler of heaven; from his right eye came Tsukiyomi, the goddess of the Moon and ruler of the night. From his nose came Susanoo, the god of the sea and of storms and rain. Then Izanagi, his work completed, left the Earth and returned to heaven.

¹ *Inconsolable*—impossible or difficult to comfort; despondent.

² *Hideous*—repulsive; revoltingly ugly.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. According to this myth, how are the islands of Japan formed?
2. What would you say is Izanagi's greatest fault?
3. Which deity do you feel more compassion for: Izanagi or Izanami?

Creation: The Nine Worlds

(Norse myth)

BY MARY POPE OSBORNE

From the middle of the first century A.C., Germanic tribes lived in southern Scandinavia and northern Germany. These people were known as the ancient Norse; their stories are collectively known as Norse legends and myths. The two most important collections of Old Norse writings are known by the title of Edda. The Poetic Edda (A.D. 9–12) is a collection of Icelandic poems and prose dating from the ninth to the 12th century. The second volume of the Edda, called the Prose Edda (A.D. 1220?), contains stories of the creation of the world, myths about Norse gods and goddesses, and information about ancient Norse poets.

The Norse deities are divided into two major groups, the Aesir and the Vanir. The most important of the Aesir are Odin and Thor. Odin is chief among the gods. Thor, god of the hammer, keeps order in the universe. The most important of the Vanir gods are Njord, Frey, and Freya. In many myths, the Aesir and Vanir are united in their fight against the terrible giants, who want control of the universe.

*'Twas the earliest of times
When Ymir lived;
There was no sand nor sea
Nor cooling wave.
Earth had not been,
Nor Heaven on high,
There was a yawning void¹
And grass no where.*

In the morning of time there was no sand, no sea, and no clouds. There was no heaven, no earth, and no grass. There was only a region of icy mist called Niflheim, a region of fire called Muspell, and a great yawning empty void between them called Ginnungagap.

¹ *void*—an empty space.

Over time, the flames of Muspell warmed the frozen vapors of Niflheim, and ice melted into water and began to drip. Quickened with life, the water dripped into the void and formed into two gigantic creatures.

The first was a wicked frost-giant named Ymir. The second was a huge cow named Audumla. As Ymir drank Audumla's milk, he grew bigger and stronger. One night as Ymir slept, a troll² with six heads grew from the soles of his feet, and a male and a female frost-giant sprung from Ymir's warm armpit.

The ice cow also brought about life. As she licked salty ice blocks, she slowly licked a new creature into being. The first day hair came forth; on the second day came a head—and finally, on the third day, the body of a new giant emerged. This giant was a good giant whose name was Burl. His sons and grandsons became gods instead of giants, and they stood for all that was good and honorable.

The greatest of Burl's grandsons was the god Odin. Odin led his brothers against the wicked frost-giant Ymir. They killed Ymir, and ever after that time, the gods and giants were deadly enemies.

After Odin and his brothers had slain the frost-giant, they dragged his enormous body into the void. Ymir's flesh became the earth. His blood became the sea. His bones became mountains; his hair, trees; and his teeth, stones.

Then Odin and his brothers discovered worms living in the earth that was Ymir's flesh, and they turned them into dwarves and dark elves and sent them to mine the ore beneath the mountains and hills. The world of the dwarves was called Nidavellir; and the world of the dark elves was called Svartalfheim.

The gods also discovered lovely creatures in the soil. They called them light elves and placed them in a world called Alfheim.

The blood that flowed from Ymir's veins became the sea, and it drowned all the frost-giants. Only two escaped in a boat and began a new race of giants. From this race came all warlocks,³ enchanters, ogres, and witches, including a witch in the woods who gave birth to all the wolves of the world.

² troll—a supernatural creature of Scandinavian myth and folklore, variously portrayed as a friendly or mischievous dwarf or as a giant, who lives in caves, in the hills, or under bridges.

³ warlocks—male witches, sorcerers, wizards, or demons.

Then Odin set Ymir's skull over the earth and called it the sky. He spread the giant's brains throughout the sky and called them clouds. At the four corners of the sky, he placed four dwarves named Nordri, Sudri, Austri, and Vestri—or North, South, East, and West.

Odin and his brothers caught sparks from the fires of Muspell and turned them into stars. They put a girl named Sun and a boy named Moon into two chariots of fire and placed them in the sky. From then on, Sun and Moon were continuously chased by a ferocious wolf named Moon-Hound.

Odin also gave chariots to a goddess named Night and her son Day. Night rode behind a horse called Frosty-Mane; the foam from his mouth became the dew of early morning.

Then Odin and his kin took Ymir's eyebrows and turned them into a land called Midgard. They made two humans from trees—a man from an ash and a woman from an elm. They gave the humans spirit, life, speech, hearing, sight, clothing, temples, and shrines.

Then the gods left their human friends in Midgard and crossed over a flaming rainbow bridge to a world called Asgard. There, they built golden

halls—one for the gods and one for the goddesses, for the goddesses were no less important than the gods.

Odin, the greatest of the gods, was the god of War and Death. After a battle ended, warrior maidens called Valkyries picked up the dead and carried them to Odin's palace, Valhalla, Hall of the Slain.

Odin's wife, Frigg, sat on the throne next to him. She was the goddess of knowledge and knew all that happened in the worlds. Frigg could look into the future and see the fates of gods and men, but she kept all her visions a secret, never sharing them with anyone.

Odin had many sons. With Frigg, he had twin boys, Balder and Hod. Balder, their favorite, was like the sun. He was the most gentle and beautiful of all the gods. Hod was blind and ruled the black hours of night.

Odin's second favorite son was Thor. The strongest of all the gods, Thor was the god of the sky and thunder. His wife, Sif, had long hair made of gold.

The god Heimdall was also a son of Odin. Night and day, he watched the rainbow bridge, keeping out enemies. His sight was so keen, he could see in the dark; his sense of sound

was so sharp, he could hear wool growing on sheep.

In the early days, there were two kinds of gods: the Aesir and the Vanir. Odin and his kin were Aesir and lived in Asgard. The Vanir, the gods of nature, lived in Vanaheim.

One day the Aesir and Vanir went to war. The fighting lasted until both grew weary and decided to become friends. Thereafter, the Vanir god Njord lived in Asgard and ruled the wind and seas. His son, Frey, ruled the rain and sunshine. And his daughter, Freya, was the goddess of love.

There was one god who was neither Aesir nor Vanir. His name was Loki, and he was the son of two giants and the foster-brother of Odin. Loki was the most dangerous of all the gods, for sometimes he was a friend and sometimes he was purely evil. No one ever knew when he could be trusted.

From the mighty halls of Asgard, the gods and goddesses ruled all the nine worlds. They were:

Niflheim, world of mist and the dead
Muspell, world of fire
Midgard, world of humans
Jotunheim, world of frost-giants

Alfheim, world of light elves
Nidavellir, world of the dwarves
Svartalfheim, world of the dark elves
Vanaheim, world of the Vanir gods
Asgard, world of the Aesir gods and goddesses

Above all these worlds was a wondrous tree called Yggdrasil, or the World Tree. A wise eagle sat on top of the tree, surveying the universe. One of the tree's roots grew into Niflheim where a dreadful serpent ceaselessly gnawed on the root. A busy squirrel named Ratatosk scurried up and down the World Tree, carrying insults back and forth between the serpent and the eagle.

Another root of the tree grew into Asgard. Under that root was Urd's Well, whose pure waters helped protect the World Tree, for it suffered terribly from deer and goats eating its leaves.

A third root coiled into Jotunheim. And under that root was Mimir's Well, whose magic waters held all the wisdom and memory of ancient lore.

Hidden in Mimir's Well was a trumpet that belonged to Heimdall, the guardian of Asgard. All the gods knew that one day a blast on Heimdall's trumpet would announce

the last bitter battle between the gods and the forces of evil. This final battle, called Ragnarok, would bring about the total destruction of the nine worlds.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What is the difference between the Aesir and the Vanir?
2. What is Ragnarok?
3. Which of these immortals do you think was most powerful: Odin, Thor, or Loki? Why?
4. What do you think life was like for the Norse people who believed in such gods?
5. Young children are often fascinated by Norse mythology. Why do you think this is so?

Desire came upon that One in the beginning; that was the first seed of mind. Poets seeking in their heart with wisdom found the bond of existence in non-existence. Their cord was extended across. Was there below? Was there above? There were seed-placers; there were powers. There was impulse beneath; there was giving-forth above.

Who really knows? Who will here proclaim it? Whence was it produced? Whence is this creation? The gods came afterwards, with the creation of the universe. Who then knows whence it has arisen? Whence this creation has arisen—perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not—the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows—or perhaps he does not know. ♦

Hindu Creation Myth THE THOUGHTS OF BRAHMA

NOTE: The source of this story is the Brahamanda Purana, one of the earliest Hindu scriptures. In this myth, Brahma, the Creator, assumes various kinds of bodies made from the three elemental substances: darkness (*tamas*), energy (*rajas*), and goodness (*satva*).

Brahma has created and re-created the world many, many times. No one knows how many worlds there have been before this one or how many will come after it. There are four ages or *yugas* that together make one *kalpa* or eon. At the end of each *kalpa*, the creation is destroyed and returned to its transition state as a watery chaos.

As Brahma meditated, beings were born from his mind. He assumed a body made of darkness, and out of his rectum came a wind—thus were the demons born. Then Brahma discarded this body of darkness and the discarded body became night.

He then assumed a new body that was made mostly of goodness and light. Out of his mouth now came the shining gods or *devas*. He cast off this body, which became day. Even today, it is during the daytime that people visit the temples and worship the gods.

He took a third body that was all *satva* [goodness]. Brahma happened to be thinking fond thoughts of fathers and sons, mothers and

daughters, and thus the “ancestor spirits” were born. These spirits appear in the dusk and the dawn, where day and night meet.

Brahma then cast off his third body and assumed a fourth that was made of the energy that emitted from his mind. With these thoughts, human beings, the thinking creatures, were created. Then he discarded this body and it became the moon. To this day human beings love the moonlight for dancing, singing, and making love.

Brahma now had a rather strange thought as he assumed a fifth body made of both energy and darkness, which caused him to emit horrible creatures that wanted to devour the primordial sea of chaos; these were the ogres.

Brahma was so disturbed by this last creation that all the hairs on his head fell out. These hairs became all the creatures that crawl around on their bellies, the snakes and other reptiles. They recall their origins by hiding in swamps, brush piles, under rocks, and other dark places.

Brahma was still troubled about creating the ogres and, thinking dark thoughts, he created the horrible Gandharvas, or ghouls.

By this time Brahma had again regained his composure and began thinking pleasant thoughts. His mind went back to the peaceful and happy time of his youth. In this state of happiness, the birds were created. Now from the body of Brahma, much more sprang forth: mammals, plants, and other forms of life.

The qualities that all living things have today are the products of what Brahma's thoughts were when they were born, and these features remain constant as long as the present world lasts. ♦

BRAHMA IS LONELY

NOTE: This very ancient myth comes from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, which may date from 1500 B.C., and the telling of this myth is based on the translation by F. Max Müller.

In the beginning, there was nothing but the Great Self, Brahman. That is to say, nothing but Brahman existed. When you sacrifice